

The Incubator **Bridging the gap between romantic relationships and sexual harassment in organizations**

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Summary

Workplace romances and sexual harassment are pervasive in today's organizations. However, despite the fact that these two phenomena share a social-sexual component, they have primarily been treated as unrelated organizational issues. We advance an affective link between workplace romances and sexual harassment. Based on this theoretical connection, we discuss conditions under which workplace romances may result in sexual harassment. Finally, we address managerial implications of the romance-harassment link. © 1997 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Introduction

Researchers in organizational behavior, industrial/organizational and social psychology, and communication have for the past 20 years been interested in examining two types of social-sexual behavior that are still pervasive in organizations. Specifically, *workplace romances*, or mutually desired romantic relationships between two members of the same organization, continue to be rampant (Dillard, Hale and Segrin, 1994). It is also well known that *sexual harassment in the workplace*, or unwelcome sexual conduct directed toward an organizational member, continues to be a problem plaguing organizations (Gutek, 1985; Pryor and McKinney, 1995).

Substantively, workplace romances and sexual harassment share an important characteristic—they both entail a sexual component between two employees (Powell, 1993). However, in our recent development of a theoretical model of workplace romance (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis,

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1996), we observed a peculiarity in the collective literature on sex in the workplace: romance at work and sexual harassment at work have primarily been treated as unrelated social-sexual issues (see Summers and Myklebust, 1992, for an exception). For example, the Bureau of National Affairs (1988) identified what are considered to be three *separate* types of corporate affairs—nepotism, office romance, and sexual harassment. Given that workplace romances and sexual harassment both include a sexual component, should organizational researchers and management continue to treat these two issues as independent phenomena? We do not believe so.

The primary objective of the present article is to advance a theoretical connection between workplace romances and sexual harassment in organizations. The purported link is based on an affective model of dissolved interpersonal relationships and is presented through a discussion of conditions that we believe can turn a workplace romance into a situation involving sexual harassment. The questions we wish to raise are as follows: (a) Is there a link between workplace romances and sexual harassment at work, and, if so, (b) What is the nature of this workplace romance–sexual harassment link? (c) What are the conditions under which workplace romances are most apt to result in sexual harassment? and (d) What are the managerial implications of a workplace romance–sexual harassment link with respect to organizational policies regarding romance and/or harassment at work?

Workplace Romance–Sexual Harassment Link

Workplace romances, regardless of whether they entail a dating or marital relationship, are typically one of two types: (a) two romantically involved employees who are of equal organizational status participate in a lateral romance, or (b) two romantically involved employees who differ in their organizational status (e.g. a supervisor–subordinate dyad) participate in an hierarchical romance. Compared to lateral romances, hierarchical romances, especially when they involve a direct reporting relationship, are perceived more negatively among members of the work group (Mainiero, 1986). Why are hierarchical romances perceived more negatively than lateral romances? Some researchers claim that hierarchical romances are more likely to lead to sexual harassment incriminations (Jenner, 1993). Although we agree with this general contention, the exact processes by which such romances lead to situations involving sexual harassment remain ambiguous.

We believe that *dissolved* direct reporting hierarchical liaisons are the crux of an affective link between workplace romances and sexual harassment. Dissolved romantic relationships, including soured hierarchical romances, are commonplace and can result in the couple experiencing negative feelings (i.e. negative affect) toward one another (cf. Duck, 1982). Moreover, unlike non-workplace romances, workplace romances often involve two employees who are required to interact frequently with one another during daily work routines. Such repeated exposure may be particularly characteristic of a direct reporting supervisor–subordinate dyad, given that each party is dependent upon the other for successfully completing critical job tasks. In terms of a dissolved hierarchical romance, we believe that the negative affect experienced by the dyad, combined with the inevitable repeated exposure to one another after the relationship has terminated, can increase the likelihood of one member of the dyad sexually harassing the other member. That is, negative affect can be greatly intensified by coming into frequent contact with a former romantic partner who, because of the soured romance, evokes unfavorable feelings. It is

these negative feelings that can lead to harassment, or accusations of harassment, on the part of both members of the dyad. Next, we provide three scenarios that portray how negative affect experienced from dissolved hierarchical workplace romances may lead to sexual harassment complaints.

First, out of revenge, a subordinate might accuse his or her supervisor of sexual harassment if the supervisor terminates the romance, especially if the subordinate entered the romance because of a job-related motive such as seeking lighter workloads, a promotion or pay raise, an increase in power, or more vacation time (cf. Dillard *et al.*, 1994). Second, if a subordinate terminates the romance against the supervisor's wishes, the supervisor may be bitter and attempt to rekindle the romance. The supervisor's coercive attempts to reunite the dyad may be undesired and, hence, considered sexually harassing. Third, a supervisor might try to manage the romantic dissolution by relocating or terminating the subordinate in order to avoid negative feelings from the disengagement. Unfortunately, researchers have indicated that females involved in workplace romances are more likely to be relocated or terminated than males (Quinn, 1977). Thus, a male supervisor's relocation or termination decision rendered in response to his romantic dissolution could be considered discrimination based on his female subordinate's gender, and such discrimination might be construed as harassment. All told, underlying each of these three scenarios is one employee who experiences negative affect as the result of a terminated workplace romance, and it is this negative affect that we believe can promote sexual harassment or claims thereof.

In sum, we posit that dissolved direct reporting hierarchical romances are the most likely type of workplace romances to result in sexual harassment in organizations because such liaisons can involve (a) a job task dependency that requires substantial amounts of social contact with one another after the romance has terminated, (b) a job-related motive for entering the romance on the part of the subordinate, and (c) a power differential whereby the supervisor has the ability to influence the subordinate (cf. Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Lee and Tedeschi, 1996), which might lead to unwanted sexual coercion and/or discriminatory managerial decision making. Next, we discuss managerial implications of this romance-harassment link in terms of organizational policy.

Organizational Policy Alternatives for Avoiding Organizational Conflict

Once a hierarchical workplace romance sours, it is virtually inevitable that the host organization will be negatively influenced by the dissolution. What can management do to avoid this problem? Some organizations prohibit supervisor-subordinate romances in an attempt to elude such organizational conflict (Schaner, 1994). Nevertheless, these types of romances still occur. We believe that organizations should adopt more effective and realistic policies for managing hierarchical romances, and even workplace romances in general. For example, romantically involved employees could be given a written contract to sign in which they mutually agree to specific congenial terms should the romance sour, such as an agreement that one member of the liaison relocates his or her office space to another part of the building. In this manner, organizations will not be prohibiting romances that are merely the result of human nature and, concurrently, will be better able to cope with dissolutions, thereby (hopefully) avoiding situations that foster sexual harassment.

In closing, our primary goal in writing this article was to advance a theoretical connection between workplace romances and sexual harassment in organizations. It is our sincere hope that researchers will examine this affective link in their efforts to better understand and manage these two pervasive organizational phenomena.

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